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Reducing Landmine Risk and Helping Victims: UNICEF Albania, 1999–2003

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been instrumental in helping Albania address its mine action problems. The following article discusses what steps UNICEF—as well as other mine action organizations within Albania—has taken during and after the conflicts in 1999 to help offset landmine concerns of both victims and the general Albanian population.



by **Aurora Bushati, Education Project Officer, UNICEF Albania**

Introduction

Albania's mine problem results from the Yugoslavia-Kosovo conflict of 1999, when landmines were placed along the 120-km border of Albania and the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, and up to one km inside of Albania. During and since the conflict, 48 people have been killed and 376 injured by landmine and UXO incidents.

Four years after the conflict, parts of Albania's northern border continue to be contaminated with mines and UXO, which are hindering the lives of people in 39 villages of three poor, isolated and mountainous districts: Kukes, Has and Tropoje. The scattered munitions and minefields leave arable land unusable in a region where opportunities for earning off-farm income are scarce. Poor infrastructure means that a trip into town takes a full day of travel. The difficulty of travel isolates people from one another, and the isolation is worsened by the lack of televisions, electricity and newspapers.

During and Immediately After the War

Almost half a million refugees from Kosovo fled into Albania during the conflict in March 1999, and they stayed there three to five months. Spontaneous civil mobilization and substantial resources from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) member states

prevented a humanitarian disaster. But the psychological trauma of the war and the disruption of normal childhood had an enormous impact on the young. Based on its human rights approach to working with children, one of UNICEF's responses was the creation of Child-Friendly Spaces, which provided some schooling, a safe play space, and creative activities that distracted children from the reality of the situation and helped them deal with their fears.

As the lead UN agency for mine awareness, UNICEF had a major role to play in warning both indigenous Albanians and refugees about the risk of mines and UXO. The UNICEF multimedia mine awareness campaign included extensive publicity through posters and leaflets at transit points, in refugee camps, at returnee way stations and on the front lines, as well as broadcasts of messages on radio and television. To deal with uncertain electricity supplies, the campaign also included distribution of wind-up radios to vulnerable refugees. The campaign included:

- A national mine awareness campaign, launched in July 1999, with the participation of the president and the ministers of Education, Defense and Culture.

- A week of anti-mine activity in September 1999, at the end of which, the Albanian Parliament pledged to ratify the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines. It did so in 2000.

- In collaboration with the Ministry of Defense, deployment of 7,000 mine-marking signs along the border.

- Mine awareness training of educators for local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), refugee community leaders and members of Albanian and Kosovar Youth Councils.

Mine awareness is difficult during a conflict—but it is equally difficult to maintain people's vigilance when the conflict is over and life has begun returning to normal. UNICEF performed this work in collaboration with the ministries of Defense and Education as well as the Albanian Mine Action Executive, Albanian Youth Council, Balkan Sunflowers, the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) and several local NGOs.

During 2000, initial steps were taken to incorporate mine awareness into the primary school curriculum—in every subject, from music and drama to history and mathematics. The methodology was highly participatory to encourage young people themselves to become disseminators of the information. UNICEF also supported the training of 100 teachers and trainers of trainers. The Ministry of Education and Science helped to produce two manuals, one for teachers and one for students. A recent agreement has been made with the Ministry to revise and publish these manuals.

Interventions During 2001–2003

A landmine injury can mean destitution to a family in a rural area where there are no off-farm work alternatives. Since June 2000, the Mine Victims

Association, UNICEF's major local partner, has identified almost 200 mine-affected households with people who are unable to meet their basic needs. UNICEF is supporting the Mine Victims Association to:

- Undertake mine risk education activities in affected communities in 39 villages of northern Albania.
- Hold counseling sessions with children and other individuals traumatized during the conflict.

- Represent mine victims' interests.
- Help mine victims with logistical support to get medical help.

• Help to lobby for support from donors. This lobbying has resulted in support from the U.S. State Department for a project aimed at socio-economic reintegration of mine victims through development of household animal breeding activities.

Mine risk education (MRE) continues in three northern districts, targeting communities and schools. The work is coordinated by anti-mine committees, represented by mine victims in each village in collaboration with peace activists and with broad participation by women. Three to five volunteers work in each village and are responsible for ensuring the safety of residents and the dissemination of information to keep the population informed about mine threats and mined areas. Theatrical plays move from village to village spreading the mine awareness message. The anti-mine committees also report to authorities about incidents and minefields and monitor the presence of warning signs. The Mine Victims Association team conducts counseling sessions with children and other people experiencing the stress from the war. Major outcomes of the work include the following:

Despite the positive outcomes, many concerns still remain. The mined area is remote and one of the poorest in Albania, and basic social services are lacking. Education opportunities for mine victims are rare. Even when people are trained, there are few job opportunities. Even people without physical disabilities find it very difficult to get around because of poor infrastructure, and for mine victims, the situation is even worse. There are not enough social workers, doctors and other professionals to serve the area.

Prevention:

- Decline in the number of landmine incidents, from 169 in 1999 to four in 2003.
- Training of 6,100 school children to spread awareness messages
- Distribution of leaflets, posters and 6,000 booklets
- Conducting of 39 monthly MRE sessions

Assistance to Mine Victims:

- 30 mine victims and 30 members of mine victim families have received vocational training in English, computers, drawing and videotaping.
- Nine have found work doing wedding videos and photography in their villages.
- 10 others work in beekeeping.
- A revolving loan fund has been created to set up sustainable support for victims.
- Local authorities are paying more attention to mine victims, including distribution of small grants to 18 families who lost houses and property during the conflict.
- Logistics assistance is being provided, including information on rehabilitation and transportation to medical appointments.

Recommendations for Future Action in Albania

Based on the analysis of the current mine problems in Albania and the results of previous mine action activities, the following suggestions are recommended for Albanian mine action in the future:

- Anti-mine committees should be trained to write proposals to win funding that would ensure the sustainability of the projects, and their role as community-based organizations should be strengthened.
- Home-based work is a good alternative for mine victims, and training should be established for animal breeding, tailoring, plumbing, marketing and handicrafts.
- Victims who have moved to urban centres need to be trained.
- Children who cannot go to school need care.

• New projects should be established for beekeeping and cattle breeding.

• The established system of raising awareness needs to be strengthened so the community can be completely responsible for solving its problems.

• Anti-mine committees are a strong institution for community development, and could be used to set up a revolving fund for mine victims and the community.

• The Albanian government should be lobbied to include mine victims in the pension scheme.

• More concerts should be held to help spread messages about behavior change.

• Former mined areas need to be reforested.

Since 2001, UNICEF has provided technical support to the Albanian Mine Action Executive (AMAE), the body that coordinates all mine action in Albania. The AMAE is responsible for ensuring the clearance and certification of the demining process. The National MRE strategy was implemented in 2001–2002,

followed by a CARE survey on mine awareness and a workshop to update the strategy. It calls for completing mine clearance of high- and medium-priority areas by 2006 (low-priority areas are not inhabited and will be cleared in coming years), with a modest budget of \$5–7 million (U.S.). This would make Albania only the second post-conflict country in the region free of mines and UXO.

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